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## ABSTRACT

All young persons in Sweden have to complete 9 years of basic compulsory schooling. More than 95 percent opt for an additional 2 or 3 years of upper secondary school, after which they have free access to further education. The system of adult education is designed to bridge the gaps between generations and to provide opportunities for recurrent, lifelong education. The traditionally strong position of adult education is partly tied to the large number of providers. Formal adult education comprises basic education operated by authorities through government grants and municipal adult education. Popular adult educational activities are studies at folk high schools or under the aegis of adult educational associations. Labor market training takes the form of specially organized vocational training or uses the regular educational system. Personnel education and inservice training are educational activities aimed at employees and organized on the employers' terms and at their expense in companies and national or local authorities. The government has tried to establish the necessary preconditions for adult educational activities, including adult education in all municipalities, educational financing, educational leave, studies as part of the renewal of working life, and adult education as an expression of general welfare policy. (YLB)

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# WORKING LIFE

IN SWEDEN

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## ADULT EDUCATION IN SWEDEN AND THE UNITED STATES

By Kenneth Abrahamsson

Kenneth Abrahamsson works as Research Secretary in the Division of Adult Education of the Swedish National Board of Education. He has been involved in comparative studies on adult and higher education in collaboration with CERI/OECD and the Nordic Council. He is the author of several books on adult learning, citizen participation and knowledge gaps in society.

### The New Learning Enterprise

The educational standards of the work force and skill formation in the workplace are "hot" issues in our days. Investing in people has become a major concern as Western societies are moving into the post-industrial era towards a more knowledge-intensive working life. A new popular movement, the so-called HRD (Human Resource Development), is coming out of institutions of higher education and from independent consultants. Investing in People, the final report of the American Commission on Workforce Quality and Labor Market Efficiency makes this observation:

US firms are already spending significant amounts of money on the education and training of their workers. It has been estimated that employers currently spend \$30 billion annually on formal training. While this amount seems large, it is important to remember that these expenditures are spread across 108 million workers and equal only 1.4 percent of the firms' payroll expenses. In addition, the expenditures are

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very unevenly distributed among workers, with high-wage workers receiving the vast majority of the training.

If we broaden the definition of staff development programs, some experts estimate that US employers invest around 210 billion dollars each year for on-the-job learning - a big "shadow industry" competing with the around 240 billion dollars spent for schools and higher education. Statistics Sweden (SCB) has made a similar assessment of the educational costs paid by Swedish employers and come up with a figure of around 3-4 billion dollars each year for a workforce of less than five million - a figure that far exceeds the public expenditure for public oriented adult education.

Comparative figures of this magnitude might make us blind to other educational needs of a post-industrial society. Employer-sponsored programs have their own specific focus and do seldom see active citizens as the primary outcome of their HRD-investments. There is consequently a great need for a strong civic component in any kind of national system of adult education and learning. The most common indicator of this need is the threat of adult illiteracy. Only one or two decades ago, adult illiteracy was mainly seen as a problem for developing countries, but today all countries with at least some capacity for critical self-reflection will agree that no school system is perfect and that there is always a small - sometimes very small - group who after nine, ten, eleven or twelve years of formal schooling still faces the problem of functional adult illiteracy. They also recognize that each country has a generation gap between the young population, a product of modern educational standards, and older adults with experiences from prior school systems. Our Western societies are also encountering a growing cultural mix following increasing emigration and immigration which has raised the need for affirmative actions for literacy.

#### The Threat of a Growing Competence Gap in Society

The rapid structural transformation towards a post-industrial society is causing stress and insecurity both for individuals and for society at large. The educational structure in most high-tech societies is often characterized by an uneven distribution of education and visible inequalities. A number of studies show a close correlation between years of formal schooling and life prospects in general.

The level of education is also one of the best predictors of further learning opportunities. Recent Swedish studies confirm this and show that university graduates are three to five times more likely to enroll in in-service training or staff development programs than workers. The same kind of social bias exists both in enrollment in adult education in general and in higher education.

The strong social determinants represented by an individual's learning attitudes and educational expectations call for more carefully considered and more flexible educational strategies. One of the most difficult problems is how to raise the educational standards and upgrade competence without widening the educational gaps between social groups or different generations. Educational policies have to be rooted in general welfare policies if we are to avoid a divided society characterized by relatively good development opportunities for around two-thirds of the population while the rest is lagging behind, supported by cash handouts.

The right to work and the right to learn are two aspects of a comprehensive welfare policy. Educational measures have a crucial function in the Swedish full-employment policy. Today, unemployment in Sweden is about 1.5 percent, an exception from international standards. Denmark has about ten percent and Norway is now approaching the same high figure as at the end of the second world war, around five percent. Many countries in Southern Europe have reached much higher rates.

### The Swedish System of Education

Any comparison of adult education in different countries has to start by taking a look at the objectives and structure of youth education. The Swedish school system has been radically reformed over the past 20 or 30 years. The level of aspiration has been high, in terms of both quantity and quality. Of fundamental importance is the principle that the school system must include all citizens and that youth education is to take the form of a comprehensive, integrated school with no dead ends.

All young persons have to complete nine years of basic compulsory schooling. However, more than 95 percent opt for an additional two or three years of upper secondary school, after which they have free access to further education in the form of specialized, theoretical or vocational higher studies. A system of adult education is designed to bridge the gaps between generations and to provide opportunities for recurrent, lifelong education.

#### 1. Compulsory School

The nine-year compulsory school has gradually been introduced and expanded since the end of the 1950's, and did not become fully operational in all areas of the country until the early 1970's. It is based on the principle that all pupils should have equal access to high quality, basic education - which represents a change from an educational system characterized by segregation and selectiveness to one of comprehensive, integrated compulsory schooling.

#### 2. Upper Secondary School

Upper secondary schooling was reformed in the late 1960's and

early 1970's, when three distinct forms of high school - gymnasium, continuation school and vocational school - were consolidated into an integrated upper secondary school with three-year theoretical and two-year vocational lines, or study programs. The upper secondary school is now approaching a third phase, in which the two-year vocational lines are to be superseded by three-year lines in which a wider program of theoretical studies will be combined with extramural work experience. All lines of the upper secondary school are to confer general eligibility for higher education.

In the mid-1970's, only about 70 percent of pupils went on from compulsory school to upper secondary school. Today practically all youngsters apply for upper secondary school, and the great majority are admitted. The lines of study chosen follow a distinct pattern. Children of manual workers and junior salaried employees tend far more often than children of senior executives to opt for vocational programs, and the respective choices of girls and boys still tend to comply with sexual stereotypes.

### Higher Education

Higher education was reformed in 1968 and again in 1977, creating a uniform system of higher education.

All post-secondary education in Sweden was brought within the higher education system, and given uniform, overriding objectives, a single planning system and a national system of management. Wider admissions to higher education, regionalization, the creation of general study programs and self-contained courses, distance teaching etc. have opened up universities to other strata of the population than those traditionally recruited.

Today, over 50% of the students are adults above 25 years of age. Women are in majority in both adult and higher education (excluding labor market training and corporate classrooms or staff development programs), but their educational choices tend to be very conventional.

### Adult Education

Adult education occupies a very strong position in Sweden by international standards. Available statistics indicate that altogether some 50 percent of the national adult population take part in some form or other of adult education in the course of a year.

All adult education organized or subsidized by the State, whether credential or non-credential, conforms to educational policy goals defined by the Riksdag. Adult education has the following aims:

1. To bridge education gaps and in this way promote greater equality and social justice.
2. To increase the ability of adults to understand, critically appraise and take part in cultural, social and political life and in this way contribute towards the development of a democratic society.
3. To train adults for various duties, to contribute towards the transformation of working life and to help achieve full employment, in this way promoting development and progress in society.
4. To cater to individual adult preferences with respect to wider opportunities for study and education, and to provide an opportunity to supplement the education received during the formative years.

In principle, adult education is open to all adults and groups who spontaneously seek it, either as a means of improving general knowledge in one or more fields or improving their competence within the community or at work. The studies are often wide-ranging and basic in character, primarily designed to provide those whose early education was brief or insufficient with an opportunity to raise their general level of knowledge.

#### The Provision of Adult Education Opportunities in Sweden

The traditionally strong position of adult education in Sweden is partly tied to the large number of organizers. Study circles, for example, are organized by eleven adult education associations whose members include all the leading popular movements. The folk high schools have more than fifty different mandators.

These many different providers operate independently of each other. There are consequently very good prospects that the specific needs and interests of mature students can be matched. The large number of mandators and their affiliation with popular movements also provide the organizers opportunities for encouraging student involvement and for extensive active recruitment.

Ever since the 1960's, the Swedish authorities have actively supported various forms of adult education, the aim being to bridge educational gaps and provide opportunities for current education. Adult education, just like youth education, must be organized in such a way as to be generally available to all comers, including the educationally disadvantaged, for whom special resources have to be earmarked. The two largest trade union organizations, LO and TCO (The Swedish Trade Union Confederation and the Swedish Confederation of Salaried Employees), have played an active part in stimulating reforms in adult education.

Adult education is a manifold concept. We have to distinguish between credit and non-credit programs, between liberal and vocational education, between formal and non-formal adult education, popular education and personnel education. Another type, which includes elements of both credential and personnel education, is labor market training.

### 1. Formal Adult Education

Formal adult education comprises basic education for adults (grundvux), which is operated by the authorities through State grants, and municipal adult education (komvux). This type of education also includes basic Swedish language instruction for immigrants. Formal adult education is above all aimed at giving adults a chance to make up for deficiencies in their previous schooling and to qualify for further studies, vocational education or employment.

### 2. Popular Adult Education

Popular adult educational activities, i.e. studies at folk high schools (residential colleges for adults) or under the aegis of adult educational associations, are partly State-subsidized. To qualify for subsidies, certain educational standards have to be met, but otherwise the mandators are at complete liberty to decide the emphasis and content of educational activities.

The abundant variety and generous availability of popular education also make it possible to reach those who would otherwise not go in for educational activities. Popular education has the declared objective of developing basic democratic values in society. Although this kind of education obviously confers knowledge and skills, its main contribution towards the democratization of society may lie in strengthening the self-confidence of the participants and increasing their understanding and respect for other people's opinions.

### Labor Market Training

Sweden has a very active labor market policy, aimed at sustaining full employment. Labor market training is an important measure for the prevention and solution of unemployment problems. Mostly it takes the form of specially organized vocational training, but it can also make use of the regular educational system.

The purpose of labor market training is to adapt the qualifications of jobseekers to actual labor demands, through rapid and flexible educational programs. This training provides a form of support for persons at a disadvantage in the labor market and makes it easier for employment offices to fill vacancies. Labor market training often takes the form of bottleneck

training, i e training programs for key areas in which there is a shortage of skilled labor.

Some labor market training takes the form of support given to employers for the training of employees. This gives the Employment Service an opportunity to refer replacements for the person being retrained or to obtain, in some other way, a guid pro quo from the individual company for the training grant.

Employment training was reorganized in 1986, and placed under a special authority, the National Employment Training Board (AMU). AMU is conducted on a commercial basis: training is purchased and sold, mainly to the labor market authorities. The Board comprises a central directorate and 24 county employment commissions, which in turn are responsible for close to 100 training units. Both the central and local commissions include representatives of the labor market parties. There are also reference groups for the various sectors in which training is organized. These groups comprise representatives of unions and business.

Most of these training programs consist of basic courses for a particular occupation. There are no formal admission requirements. The participants are generally able to make up for any theoretical deficiencies in the course of their vocational studies. There is a high level of curricular flexibility. Students are admitted successively, and they join continuous study programs either individually or in small groups. An individual plan of study is drawn up in consultation with each participant.

#### In-service Training and Staff Development

Personnel education and in-service training, in the present context, can be defined as educational activity aimed at employees and organized on the employer's terms and at his expense in companies and national or local authorities. Decisions relating to personnel education are made by the employer, even though the trade unions are able to exert varying degrees of influence. Sweden does not have any legislation governing entitlement to or union influence on personnel training, but agreements on the subject have begun to develop between the labor market parties.

Labor force surveys (AKU) are regularly undertaken by Statistics Sweden, the national organization responsible for the compilation of statistics. According to an AKU survey in 1987, more than one million persons, or just over 25 percent of the workforce, took part in some form of personnel education during the first half of that year.

There are great differences between employee categories. In terms of union membership, 20 percent of LO members, 38 percent of TCO members and 48 percent of SACO members (The Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations) were involved in personnel

education. This imbalance becomes even more pronounced if we take into account the duration of education. The already well-educated receive twice as much personnel education as the least well educated. The average per member and year in this respect is 2.3 days for LO members, 4.3 days per TCO members and 6 days for SACO members.

### Towards a Learning Society - a Question of Learning Rights?

There are of course several other possible ways of describing Swedish adult education. One way is to refer solely to the lofty goals and overriding objectives. Another is to describe as exhaustively as possible the goals, content and participants of the various forms of education. Here it may be appropriate to begin by summarizing some of the main institutional conditions governing adult education in Sweden.

There are several important, basic conditions which have to be met in order to make it possible for gainfully employed adults to engage in educational activity of more than recreational nature: there must be an adequate range of educational opportunities; the individual must be able to finance his or her educational activity; and there must be some form of guarantee concerning leave of absence from work.

In Sweden, the State has assumed responsibility for all of these areas and has tried, by various means, to establish the necessary preconditions for adult educational activities.

#### 1. Adult Education in All Municipalities

All citizens, regardless of residential locality and social status, have equal access to adult education. The creation of municipal and national adult education - an organization parallel to youth education - gives adults an opportunity to acquire the same competence and formal qualifications as are conferred by youth education. The direct support given by the State to popular education, in the form of extensive subsidies for both study circle activities and folk high schools, has given popular education an internationally unique position. Both formal and non-formal popular education have, as a result of State support, been established in all regions of the country. State subsidies also make it possible for education to be provided at very little charge or none at all.

#### 2. Educational Financing

Sweden has chosen to legislate on educational leave of absence and to provide a broad range of social benefits for students. Thus at all educational levels the individual first applies for an educational program and is then able, through a variety of student benefits, to obtain coverage of personal expenses. "Study

Assistance", consisting of a small grant and a larger loan, is something to which all members of the community are entitled. For gainfully employed adults there is, in addition, special adult study assistance, which is partly income-related and is intended to make up for loss of earnings. This latter grant is mainly given to the educationally disadvantaged.

This opportunity to finance studies by means of separate social benefits in addition to the right to educational leave of absence, gives the individual considerable freedom as to educational form and specialty.

### 3. Educational Leave

Swedish legislation, guaranteeing entitlement to educational leave, stresses individual freedom of choice in educational matters. Thus all gainfully employed persons are entitled by law to educational leave, without any restriction as regards its duration or the choice of study.

### 4. Studies as Part of the Renewal of Working Life

Adult studies and learning also occupy a prominent position in the reform of working life. The Shop Stewards Act, the Co-Determination Act and various other collective agreements entitle trade union representatives to devote time to studies during paid working hours. Just as labor market policy is vitally important to adult education, questions concerning job content and control over working life, as well as the working environment, have a crucial bearing on educational activity and the development of civic competence.

Workplace training in the form of personnel education is in fact the sector of Swedish education which has grown most rapidly in recent years. Working life as a setting for learning and educational activities is expected to expand further in the future. Today's employers increasingly emphasize skill formation and learning enterprises as opposed to conventional courses and built-in education programs.

### 5. Adult Education as an Expression of General Welfare Policy

Finally, adult education can be viewed as an important element of general welfare policy. A high level of knowledge and education benefits both the individual and society. Opportunities for adult studies and the free acquisition of knowledge must be open to all members of the community.

In drawing a picture of adult education in our countries we find that the important thing, is not whether it is the result of public policies or a market-oriented model. A more constructive approach is to see to what extent the different systems are able

to guarantee adult learning for everybody. This means that individual's learning rights (both for self-directed learning, shorter courses and longer study projects) should be defined in terms of his or her role as:

- \* a free citizen actively participating in the democratic dialogue
- \* an employee aiming to upgrade his or her professional competence
- \* a critical consumer
- \* an independent individual wanting to expand his or her horizons and fulfill learning ambitions
- \* a member of a popular movement identifying with collective learning ideals and the transformation of society

The question must always be asked to what extent our systems of adult and continuing education support, neglect or reject these learning rights.

In all countries, the growth of education is currently mainly concentrated to the sphere of working life. This presents both a challenge and a threat. A healthy balance must be maintained. It is important to guard against a development in which employers monopolize the future of adult learning - thus endangering the free sector of citizen-oriented adult learning as traditionally expressed in the Swedish study circles and folk high schools.

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The author alone is responsible for the opinions  
expressed in this article.

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\*\*\*\*\* SEE LAST PAGE FOR IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT \*\*\*\*\*

#### LITERATURE

Available free of charge from the Swedish Information Service, New York. Please include a self-addressed mailing label with your order.

- ( ) ADULT EDUCATION ASSOCIATIONS IN SWEDEN. The National Swedish Federation of Adult Education, 1988
- ( ) ADULT EDUCATION IN SWEDEN (FS 64, May 1988)
- ( ) ADULT LEARNING; WORK AND CITIZENSHIP (Report on New Sweden 88 Adult Education Seminars)

- ( ) PERSONNEL TRAINING (The Swedish Trade Union Confederation, 1989)
- ( ) SWEDISH ADULT EDUCATION TOWARDS THE 21ST CENTURY (The Swedish National Board of Education, 1988)
- ( ) THE SWEDISH FOLK HIGH SCHOOL (Swedish National Board of Education, 1986)
- ( ) WORKER EDUCATION IN SWEDEN: A FORCE FOR EXTENDING DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION by Norman Eiger. Reprint from Scandinavian Review, Spring 1988

#### TRAVEL GRANTS

##### The Bicentennial Swedish-American Exchange Fund

Qualified American citizens with well-developed projects in the fields of politics, public administration, mass media, business and industry, working life, human environment, education, and culture are invited to apply for travel grants from the Bicentennial Swedish-American Exchange Fund. Grants of approximately SEK 20,000 will be made to support three to six week study visits to Sweden. Deadline for receipt of application is February 9, 1990. Awards will be announced in Mid-May

#### SASS TRAVEL GRANTS

The Swedish Embassy and the Swedish Information Service will divide \$4,000 among grantees for study or research in Swedish language, literature or linguistics. Membership in the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study (SASS) is a requirement for eligibility. Priority will be given to graduate students and  untenured faculty. Social Science graduate students may use grants for intensive Swedish language study in Sweden. Otherwise grants may be used for projects in either North America or Sweden. Deadline for application: March 15, 1990. Awards will be announced in April, 1990.

For information and application form send self-addressed envelope, marked "Bicentennial Fund" or "SASS Travel Grants", to:

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Within the next few months, we will be engaging in extensive computerization and updating of all our mailing lists. In order to make certain that our lists and addresses are current, we will be mailing a questionnaire, under separate cover, to everyone currently receiving our bulletins. When you receive this questionnaire, we ask that you take a moment to complete the form and return it to us, THEREBY INDICATING YOUR INTEREST IN RECEIVING OUR BULLETINS IN THE FUTURE. If you fail to do so, your name may be deleted from our mailing list.